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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BANGKOK 002625

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [TH](#)

SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR DISCUSSES POLICE CHIEF BATTLE AND
DEMOCRAT PARTY POLITICS WITH FORMER PRIME MINISTER CHUAN
LEEKPAI

REF: A. BANGKOK 2597 (ENVIRONMENTALISTS VERSUS
INDUSTRIALISTS)

[1](#)B. BANGKOK 2549 (CHARTER CHANGE)

[1](#)C. BANGKOK 2125 (POLICE CHIEF BATTLE)

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Classified By: AMBASSADOR ERIC G. JOHN, REASON: 1.4 (B) AND (D).

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: On October 13, the Ambassador met with Chuan Leekpai, a two-time former Prime Minister and senior statesmen within the ruling Democrat party. Chuan told the Ambassador he believed PM Abhisit would stick to his principles -- and not back down in his support of Police General Prateep -- in resolving the ongoing Police Chief controversy. Chuan also expressed regret that Niphon Promphan, a former Secretary-General for Prime Minister Abhisit and a trusted advisor to the Crown Prince, had resigned as Secretary General. According to Chuan, Deputy Prime Minister Suthep was not always as supportive of the Prime Minister as Chuan would like him to be.

[1](#)2. (C) On the subject of the constitutional reform efforts under way in Parliament, Chuan told the Ambassador the opposition Puea Thai party was only interested in paving the way for Thaksin's return. Chuan did not see any realistic avenue for Thaksin's imminent return to Thailand, and argued that the Abhisit government had made great strides correcting many of the problems Thaksin had created, particularly in the area of press freedom. The Ambassador detailed for Chuan U.S assistance work in terms of promoting good governance and supporting the Thai judiciary. Chuan told the Ambassador he thought the Map Tha Phut verdict would likely be overturned on appeal (see para 15).

[1](#)3. (C) Comment: Chuan was relaxed and seemed as sharp and insightful as ever. We found Chuan's willingness to touch on tensions between the PM and DPM Suthep to be revealing. Though many of our Democrat contacts in Parliament have assured us that Niphon Promphan's resignation represented

little more than an inconvenient speed bump for the party, it was clear from Chuan's discussion of the resignation and issues between the PM and DPM Suthep that the party is still contending with a host of internal issues. While we believe the PM will be able to weather these internal Democrat party disagreements, as we saw with the Niphon resignation, from time to time they will likely break out into full public view. End Summary and Comment.

POLICE CHIEF ISSUE

¶4. (C) The Ambassador, accompanied by Acting Polcouns, began the meeting by asking for Chuan's thoughts on the long-simmering feud over the next Police Chief (REF C). Chuan told the Ambassador that he expected PM Abhisit to "remain true to himself" as the drama over the Police Chief continued to unfold, adding that Abhisit would weigh long and short-term interests in deciding what would be best for the country. Hinting indirectly at the Crown Prince's widely-publicized attempts to influence the decision, Chuan told the Ambassador that the Prime Minister would act in the people's best interests only, and would not be influenced by outside parties.

¶5. (C) Noting that the Police Chief issue had forced the PM to make difficult decisions, the Ambassador asked whether the exhaustive domestic media coverage of the Police Chief issue had exacerbated problems for Abhisit. Chuan agreed that it had, but underscored his belief that Abhisit had shown leadership on the issue and would ultimately prevail. According to Chuan, if Abhisit were not a firm and principled

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leader, he would have buckled in the face of the pressure to appoint a different candidate a long time ago. Abhisit placed the country above all other interests.

INTRA-PARTY FEUDING

¶6. (C) Turning to the subject of Niphon Promphan's recent decision to step down as Secretary General, Chuan told the Ambassador that he had personally intervened in an effort to prevent Niphon from resigning. Characterizing Niphon as an "honest broker," Chuan said that it would be difficult to replace him. When the Ambassador noted speculation that Deputy Prime Minister Korbsak -- who has worked closely and effectively with the Embassy on a range of economic issues -- was poised to be tapped for the job, Chuan said that Korbsak had established himself as an authority on economic matters, both in the government and formerly as a member of the opposition.

¶7. (C) Chuan also expressed regret that Deputy Prime Minister Suthep and Prime Minister Abhisit had clashed at times. Chuan had worked to persuade Suthep to support the Prime Minister across the board, but his efforts had not always been completely successful. The Police Chief issue and Niphon's resignation were symptomatic of a certain level of dysfunction between the Prime Minister and the Deputy that Chuan had worked to rectify.

CONSTITUTION

¶8. (C) The Ambassador asked Chuan for his thoughts on ongoing efforts to reform the 2007 Constitution (REF B), noting PM Abhisit's public comments that he would drop his Constitutional reform efforts in the face of continued opposition from the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), aka "the yellow-shirts," and the Puea Thai party. According to Chuan, agreeing on a path forward to revise the Constitution would be exceedingly difficult as the government and the opposition Puea Thai party really only agreed on two

items: a proposal to specify the types of international agreements which require prior parliamentary approval, as well as a proposal to allow members of parliament (MPs) to concurrently hold positions within the government.

¶9. (C) On other issues of note, including a proposal to return to an MP election system in which a single candidate would represent a single constituency, the Democrat party and Puea Thai were at loggerheads. According to Chuan, the Democrats opposed a return to the single candidate/single constituency system as vote buying was a major problem with such a system. Chuan believed another proposal -- which would ban candidates found guilty of electoral fraud and party executives found guilty of collusion without dissolving the party -- should in theory enjoy support from all parties, though it currently had little traction. In lamenting the slow overall progress on the constitutional reform effort, Chuan put the blame squarely on the Puea Thai party's shoulders. According to Chuan, Puea Thai was only truly interested in revising the Constitution to allow Thaksin to return without facing jail time. The party cared very little about anything else.

THAKSIN AND HIS LEGACY

¶10. (C) On the subject of Thaksin, the Ambassador asked Chuan whether he believed there was any viable path forward for his return to Thailand, noting the many obstacles seemingly preventing such a return. Chuan agreed that Thaksin's fugitive legal status and insistence on avoiding jail time made the prospect of his return unlikely anytime soon. He characterized it as a "complicated" situation.

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¶11. (C) Turning to Thaksin's mixed legacy as a Prime Minister, Chuan asserted that under Prime Minister Abhisit and the Democrat party leadership, there had been a surge in media freedom. Thaksin had imposed severe limits on the press and under Abhisit's leadership the landscape for journalists in Thailand had changed dramatically. Furthermore, PM Abhisit had made great strides in tackling corruption in the Thai media and had increased accountability overall, two major improvements compared to the Thaksin administration.

GOOD GOVERNANCE ASSISTANCE

¶12. (C) The Ambassador told Chuan that while the United States had confidence in the strength and maturation of democratic institutions in Thailand, corruption remained a serious concern. With that in mind, the United States looked forward to continuing its close collaboration with the RTG and would expand its assistance efforts with an eye on promoting good governance. Chuan shared the Ambassador's concerns with the impact of corruption in Thailand and inquired about the specifics of Mission's good governance work. After the Ambassador outlined the details of the programming, noting partnership with the independent agencies involved with government oversight as well as civil society groups, Chuan expressed his appreciation for USG assistance programming and noted that the objectives were in line with RTG goals.

THE JUDICIARY AND MAP THA PHUT

¶13. (C) Turning to the subject of the judiciary, the Ambassador noted that in Thailand, judges moved to the bench much faster than in many other legal systems. As a result, judges often lacked valuable experience and the requisite training needed to serve as an effective judge. Noting his own legal background and training, Chuan agreed that judges moved to the bench too quickly in some instances and conceded

that the system still required improvement. The Thai people still had great confidence in the judiciary, however, and Chuan stated that the vetting process for judges was extremely rigorous.

¶14. (C) According to Chuan, the entire judicial branch had made great strides since Thaksin's departure. Judges now made decisions based on the evidence at hand, and corruption was much less of a concern at all levels. There was still a question of how best to balance judicial autonomy with oversight, but overall, there was no question that conditions throughout the legal system had greatly improved.

¶15. (C) Chuan told the Ambassador that the one notable exception to what was an otherwise rigorous nationwide selection process for judges was at the Administrative Court level. The Administrative Courts had a different selection process in place for judges and as a result, the quality of the judges was uneven. The verdict in the Map Ta Phut Industrial area case was an unfortunate illustration of this, though Chuan was personally optimistic that the ruling would be overturned on appeal. To the extent that one could take anything positive away from the Map Ta Phut ruling, Chuan believed that it least it demonstrated to the world that Thailand was committed to protecting the environment.

LEGAL TRAINING

¶16. (C) The Ambassador noted that -- in addition to its Good Governance programming -- the USG also worked with the RTG on judicial training. Mission conducted police and prosecutor workshops and collaborated with other training opportunities.

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Chuan expressed appreciation for the training and asked whether the United States would be able to assist with evidence collection and forensics work. The Ambassador informed Chuan that the United States already collaborated in this area throughout the country, noting for example the assistance the USG had provided to investigators in the South charged with investigating violent attacks. (Note: Mission will follow-up with a letter to Chuan detailing all aspects of Mission's law enforcement and judicial training efforts. End Note.)

JOHN